

Scalehouse (Old Customhouse)

HABS No. VI-3

West side Christiansted Wharf Square,

at foot of King Street; Christiansted National Historic Site
Christiansted

St. Croix

Virgin Islands

HABS
VI,
1-CHRIS,
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

SCALEHOUSE (OLD CUSTOMSHOUSE)

Address: West side Christiansted Wharf Square, at foot of King Street; Christiansted National Historic Site, Christiansted, St. Croix, Virgin Islands.

Present Owner: Virgin Islands Government.

Present Occupant and Use: Christiansted Chamber of Commerce; used as office.

Statement of Significance: Christiansted was an important trading center in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the scalehouse was a central feature in the wharf area. The building is typical of the 19th-century architecture in the Danish West Indies.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Government of the Danish West Indies to 1917; Government of the U. S. Virgin Islands since.
2. Date of erection: November 1855 - Sept. 1856.
3. Architect: Ludvig Schellerup.
4. Builder: Martin Larke, mason; B. Thomas, carpenter.
5. Notes on known alterations and additions:

The history of this building has been studied in detail by National Park Service Historian Herbert Olsen, primarily through documentary material in the Danish and American National Archives. The following information (footnotes omitted) has been extracted from his Historic Structures Report, Part I, Scalehouse, October 1960, copies at the Virgin Islands National Park Headquarters, St. Thomas, and the Eastern Office, Design and Construction, National Park Service, 143 South Third Street, Philadelphia:

GENERAL CONSTRUCTION DATA

Introduction

A scalehouse was a central feature in the wharf area of the town of Christiansted almost from the first days of St. Croix' colonization by the Danes. Town plans of the 1750's and 1760's show a scalehouse slightly to the south of the existing site, but by 1778-79 there was a small scalehouse on the present location. The latter was replaced by a new and larger scalehouse in the early 1790's which, according

to accounts, plans, and illustrations, was a one-story wooden building with a dormer facing north and south above the center of the building. The building measured approximately 55 feet by 21 feet and had both clapboard and shingle siding and a shingled roof.

Construction: 1855-56

After many years of service, the wooden scalehouse was found to be in very poor structural condition in the fall of 1855. Building Inspector Ludvig Schellerup prepared a plan and estimate for the construction of a new building, therefore, and Schellerup's proposal was approved by the colonial government on November 17, 1855. However, the government stipulated that the new building was to be 6 feet longer than the old one, but laid out in the same direction, and that the interior was to be so laid out that the old scale could be reused.

The old scalehouse was torn down and construction of the new one was begun by Mason Martin Larke and Carpenter B. Thomas late in November. Larke apparently completed the walls of the first story in December, after which Thomas framed the second story and was ready to lay the galvanized sheets on the roof by January 22, 1856. Painting of the building was half completed by W. Branegan on April 16. However, the building was not ready for inspection and acceptance until the end of August or early September because extra work not called for in the original plans was subsequently requested by the building inspector and approved by the colonial government. The extra work also caused construction costs to the building to increase from \$2,229.55 to \$3,665.92 1/2 Danish West Indian currency.

Despite the lack of construction drawings, a reasonably clear picture of the Scalehouse emerges from construction documents and accounts.

The first story of the building was constructed of brick masonry throughout. There were two large gates in each of the north and south walls, and there was also a door centered in the south wall. The east and west end walls each had two windows. The ground floor was divided into three rooms--the east end room contained the scale for weighing sugar, the center room was the office of the weighmaster, and the west end room was a room for inspecting imported goods. The east end room was two stories high, since the old-fashioned upright scale was hung from a frame which was more than one story high.

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The second story of the building was of wooden frame construction with shingled sides. The roof consisted of galvanized sheets laid on wooden sheathing covered with roofing paper. The second story was divided into two rooms for use as quarters by the soldiers who were attached to the Customs Department. Access to the second story was provided by a brick stairway erected against the exterior of the north side of the building. The stairway was equipped with a wrought iron railing designed by Schellerup and made by Royal Blacksmith Iversen.

The windows and doors of the building were equipped with hurricane shutters. The two windows in the west end wall of the first story were also equipped with inner blinds; the door centered in the south wall was provided with an inner door which had glass panes above and wooden jalousies below; and two of the windows in the south wall of the second story were equipped with wooden jalousies. A brick gutter was laid around the entire building, and it was bridged at the door in the south wall by a plank or wooden bridge and at the four large gates in the north and south walls by hardwood skids. Galvanized iron gutters were hung around the roof of the building. Four unusable cannons were set in the ground at the corners of the structure to act as fenders.

Maintenance

Danish Era: 1856-1917. ---. . . in 1861, several alterations and additions were made to the structure; a window was cut in the north wall near the foot of the stairway to the second floor, and a rainguard 9 feet by 5 feet and covered with galvanized iron sheets was erected over the door centered in the south wall.

Minor repairs were made to the galvanized roof in 1866, and the brick floor in the scaleroom was relaid in the same year. . . .

By 1878 the roof was leaking so badly that it became necessary to recover it. However, instead of recovering the roof with galvanized iron sheets, wooden shingles were used.

Little is known about the maintenance of the building during the decade of the 1880's, but it was sometime during this era that the old scale was removed and replaced by a new floor-type scale. As a result, it was possible to convert the east end room into two stories in either 1888 or 1889 by laying a floor between the first and second stories.

A request for the installation of a bathroom in the second story of the structure was made as early as 1891, but it was apparently not until 1897 that the request was finally approved and that the bathroom was installed. In the latter year, too, attention was called in the annual budget request to the need to partially recover the roof, but apparently the request was not approved. However, the unspecified "expenses in connection with the hurricane [of August 8, 1899] on the Scalehouse" unquestionably included repairs to and recovering of the roof of the building with galvanized sheets instead of shingles.

A clothes closet, which had been requested annually from 1891 on, was apparently built in the center room of the second story in 1900. . . .

The proposal to erect a shed on the north side of the building was renewed and resubmitted to the colonial council as a supplemental money bill to the annual budget for the fiscal year 1909/10. After

passage by the colonial council, the King of Denmark approved the bill on June 10, 1910.

The shed, built of reinforced concrete and covered with galvanized iron sheets, was 60 feet by 18 feet by 10 feet and was completed in 1911 at a total cost of 4,922.95 francs, or 922.92 francs more than was originally allotted by the colonial council. The increased cost was due to a change in plans which, in place of the erection of a stairway inside the building, called for the construction of a gallery and stairway outside the building to provide access to the second story. It was probably also at this time or shortly thereafter that the rainguards on the north and east sides of the second story of the building were put up.

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American Era: 1917-60.-- Existing records shed little light on building maintenance during this era but few changes of significance can have taken place. However, it is probable that it was during this era that electricity was installed in the building. Moreover, the partition which separated the center and west end rooms on the ground floor was removed around 1934.

Since the establishment of the Virgin Islands National Historic Site in 1952, the rainguard over the entrance door in the south wall has been rehabilitated. The rehabilitation, which took place in 1956, included two new turned posts, new fascia boards, repair of the galvanized roof, and painting of the entire lean-to.

A general exterior rehabilitation of the building was completed in 1959 by the Public Works Department, Government of the Virgin Islands. Repairs were made to exterior woodwork, spouts and gutters, rainguards, and the roof, and the entire building was painted. Minor changes were made at the same time in the center room of the second floor by the Chamber of Commerce, including the removal of a partition and the covering of the floor with masonite and asphalt tile.

A radio antenna has been mounted on the roof by the harbor master, as well as a streetlight and a spotlight on the northeast rainguard. The existing flagpole was also erected by the harbor master in 1958 to replace an earlier flagpole located on the same site.

FURNISHINGS AND ACCESSORIES

The Scalehouse was constructed to house facilities to weigh and inspect exports and imports, to provide an office for the weighmaster, and to furnish quarters for the troops attached to the Customs Department. Troops were not quartered in the building after the Virgin Islands were transferred to the United States in 1917, and the rooms on the second floor were therefore converted into offices and filing rooms for the United States Customs Service. Shortly after 1941, however, the Customs Service moved its offices to the Christiansted Post Office, and the rooms on the second floor of the building have since

been used as offices by various other agencies or organizations. The ground floor, however, continues to be used in its entirety by the Customs Service as a bonded warehouse.

When the building was first completed in 1856, the scaleroom was equipped with the old-fashioned balance from the former scalehouse which was hung in a heavy wooden frame more than one story high. This scale was replaced sometime in the 1880's by a flat scale which was set in the brick floor of the scaleroom, and this type of scale is still to be found in place.

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Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect
National Park Service
August 1965

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: The building with its heavy stuccoed brick walls and light exposed wooden frame second story is typical of the 19th century Danish Virgin Island construction. Except for an addition to the rear and the elimination of the former staircase to the second floor, the building has preserved its original character.
2. Condition of fabric: The building is in fair condition. The older masonry section appears sound. Parts of the wooden second story and some floor beams are termite ridden and require replacement. The wooden reinforced concrete addition has exposed steel in several areas and shows signs of deterioration. The building is free standing with its front side in line with the extension of King Street. It faces the wharf square and southeast. The access to the first story of the building is from the front and rear, and the southeast and northwest. An exterior stair leads to the second story along the northeast side of the building.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Over-all dimensions: Two stories, 60' (three-bay front) x 40' (two bays) with rear one-story shed addition (1911).
2. Foundations: The older section of the structure rests on a rubble masonry foundation of undetermined depth. The foundation is articulated by a plinth a few inches above the open gutter that surrounds the building. The newer section has a concrete foundation.
3. Wall construction: The walls of the original section are brick masonry set in lime mortar. The walls are plastered

inside and out. Gates, openings and corners are quoined in 2" relief. Door and window openings have keystones set in 2" relief but are otherwise plain. The masonry walls extend the full height of the first story and support a wooden frame wall. The frame is exposed on the inside towards the exterior. It is sheathed and shingled. The wooden corner boards are grooved to resemble quoins. The addition has 5" reinforced concrete walls cast in a corrugated form and set between concrete columns. (7 by 2 bays)

4. Openings:

- a. Doorways: The front towards the wharf area square has two ten feet wide arched doorways of the same width. All doorways have double gates. In the rear wall they are of a wooden lattice construction in a herringbone pattern. On the front the north doorway has a picket gate, the south doorway has gates of solid double plank construction. The center door of the front is of the same construction. The doorway is covered by a small lean-to resting on two turned posts and with a jig-saw edging below the roof.

The second floor has access from a four-foot-wide, roofed open passage that runs the full length of the building above the first story addition. There are two doorways, both with single doors of the same construction as the first floor center front door.

- b. Windows: All windows are equipped with double storm shutters (that open out) of double plank construction. On the first floor there are no other sash. On the second floor they have jalousies that open inward. Eight-light casement sash occur in three windows in the east corner of the building.

5. Roof: The roof is hipped on an exposed truss, sheathed and covered with corrugated metal roofing. There is no cornice and the eaves project only slightly over the walls which end in a trim board. The addition has a corrugated metal shed roof on wooden joists. The second story balcony has a corrugated metal roof supported on iron pipe columns. An extension to the roof has been added along the northeast side to protect the second story windows. The extension is carried on wooden brackets.

C. Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: The ground floor of the older section of

the building is divided into two sections by a recent wooden partition. It appears originally to have been entirely open except for two posts that support a girder running lengthwise through the center of the room. The posts are placed at the third points.

The addition contains one large room with a row of iron pipe columns supporting the second-story balcony. The wall separating the newer and the older section had doorways similar to the front exterior wall. The south doorway has been partially blocked and an additional 30" door has been opened. The second floor has been divided into four sections by lateral wooden partitions. The end sections are each two bays wide; the center ones are one bay wide.

The south end and center section have been further subdivided into two rooms each. A water closet and lavatory have been installed in the north center section along the northwest wall and partitioned off.

2. Stairways: The only staircase is the previously mentioned exterior staircase on the northeast side of the building. It is constructed in reinforced concrete and has a wrought iron rail. It dates from 1911.
3. Flooring: The ground floor is paved in concrete. A wagon weighing scale is set in a pit in the pavement in the north end of the old section of the building. The second floor has tongue and groove pine board flooring.
4. Wall and ceiling finishes: The masonry of the ground floor is plastered and whitewashed. The ceiling is wooden with exposed beams. All wood is pine and finished. Beams and posts are beaded.

On the second floor the structural members and the exterior sheathing are exposed. Studs, braces, joists, etc. are beaded. All wood is pine and finished. The structural frame also serves as frame for doors and windows.

5. Doors: The interior doors are single plank construction with simulated paneling on one side, produced by application of molded trim pieces along edges.
6. Trim: There is no trim on the first floor. On the second floor the interiors have a baseboard mitred around the structural members. The exterior of doors and windows have trim boards at jambs, a slightly protruding head and beaded sill trim. The interior partitions extend to the plate height only. In case of the lateral partitions the space between the top of the partition and the roof

tie is filled with wooden lattice work in a diagonal pattern reminiscent of chippendale screens. The partitions have a beaded crown molding on their sheathed side only. For doors the same conditions apply with a trimmed casing on the sheathed side of walls only.

7. Hardware: All hardware is wrought iron except for recent applications. The shutters and doors have heavy W. I. strap hinges with storm hooks and interior bar rings and brackets for hurricane closure. The jalousies and the casement windows have wing hinges, surface bolts and hooks and eyes. Door locks are all replacements except for W. I. hasps on the center and south door front and a W. I. sliding surface bolt on the interior of the south door.
 8. Lighting: Electricity has been installed. No traces of other types of illumination have been observed.
 9. Heating: None
- D. Site: The Customs House is located on the west side of the wharf area square approximately 20 feet from the wharf which extends east and west from the Customs House. It is freestanding and completely surrounded by pavement.

Prepared by Frederik C. Gjessing, Architect
National Park Service
November 1959